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D. W. May Chang

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LETTER

TO

GOVERNOR WRIGHT, OF INDIANA,

UPON

THE CONNEXION OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH WITH THE;
SUBJECT OF SLAVERY.

LETTER TO GOVERNOR WRIGHT, OF INDIANA.

MY DEAR SIR: By the appointment of the Methodist Episcopal church, her general conference meets on the first day of May, in your city. As a Methodist, I feel the very deepest solicitude for the result of her action upon all those questions of church policy either affecting or growing out of those agitated issues connected with the policy of the political parties of the country. Just such questions will be presented to her for her action and determination, and her very being, as well as her influences, are dependent upon the exercise of moderation, and wisdom, and Christian charity, in the position she takes at the present general conference. Upon this subject, and to you as a Methodist, I beg leave to suggest a few thoughts which are not unworthy of the consideration of that body, and which are eminently proper for the careful reflection of every member of the Methodist Episcopal church, at this time.

The church of Christ, in its early history, claimed no right, *as an ecclesiastical body*, to interfere in any way with the civil government. This was true in the very foundation of Christianity, as announced by its immortal founder himself. When the Son of God was doomed by the Roman law to its most degrading condemnation, to suffer its most excruciating pain, He did not so much as resist it, because it was law, nor did He charge the law with injustice or oppression. "When Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews? * * * Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world, if my kingdom was of this world then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but now is my kingdom not from hence. * * * To this end was I born and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." JOHN, xviii, 35-37.

Christ found the Roman kingdom enthroned in power, and the Jewish people subject to its dominion. Yet in no instance did He counsel the Jews to rebellion or incite them to throw off the Roman yoke. By lineal descent, He was "THE KING OF THE JEWS," yet He never asserted his temporal power, but refused to be crowned in that right.

By the Roman law, the amphitheatres were opened for the amusement of the people, who were attracted thither to witness the fights of wild beasts and the butchery of men. Victims were slaughtered after every victory, and the Roman empire itself was extended by fraud and violence of every kind; human life was sacrificed; human liberty was held by no more certain tenure than the whim of the sovereign power; protected by no written or definite constitution, and regarded by no fundamental law. Property was subject to the seizure of kings, and Roman citizenship, so highly estimated by the Romans, was not sufficient to secure justice to the citizen; indeed, it existed more in form than in fact. Slavery was not a mere accident of society, but constituted one of its essential elements, and a very powerful one in the government; *that* slavery, too, was of the most cruel character, and gave to the master absolute discretion over the life of the slave. Under a republican government, in a Christian age, this condition and character of society seems revolting, as it was unquestionably unjust. At this day, among civilized men, it can find no apologist. But the Lord Jesus Christ did not make war upon the government, nor denounce the rulers as such, notwithstanding all these wrongs were obnoxious to the doctrines of the Gospel, and the character of His mission, for He looked upon cruel legislation in its true character, as a result and not as a cause. All these enormities had their foundations laid far deeper than mere legislation. They were the result of human ambition, human hate, remorseless despotism; all of which were the result of a heart clothed with impurity, "*Deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.*"

He commenced the work of regeneration, not in the government, as an enormous whole which could not be reached, but He commenced the work of warning every man of sin. And as a most remarkable demonstration of this great truth, the only denunciations which the Saviour did use were those used in reference to the doctors and lawyers, ministers and expounders of the law of the Jewish Church, nor did Christ, in one single instance, denounce the *Church itself*, though it was, surely, not in a moral condition, commanding itself to His approval.

The proof becomes more palpable and overwhelming when the case of Paul is presented. He had been falsely accused, despotically arraigned, cruelly imprisoned. And afterward his private fortune and the generosity of his friends were laid under tribute to procure his release. He was brought before a licentious governor, an unjust

ruler, and an infidel. In his defence before Felix he never so much as speaks of the Roman law, which arrested the freedom of speech, denied the rights of conscience, and trammelled the liberty of opinion, but "he reasoned of *righteousness* and *temperance* and the *judgment to come.*" He arrested the conviction of his auditor; he charged him before Heaven with *personal* delinquency, individual crime, and, as a *man*, he held him up to a terrible responsibility to God. "*And Felix trembled.*" Here would have been a most fit opportunity to challenge the correctness of the Roman law, to condemn its regulations, or to question its legitimate authority, but instead of this he plead his rights *under* the law. And he appealed to the law, and justified himself by the law. More than once did he claim the rights of a "*Roman citizen,*" and availed himself of its protection, and scorned to play treason against the law. The plan adopted by Christ was, to lay the axe to the root of the tree, to purify the hearts of the people, as individuals, and thereby *prepare* them for a better, and higher, and nobler condition as citizens.

This method of the Saviour for the reformation of the world was one clearly founded upon an unerring knowledge of human character. He knew, as the Omniscient God, what frail mortal man has since seen unmistakably demonstrated in the history of the world, that the evils of civil government have not their origin in legislation, for legislation itself is only one of the many effects of that great cause which Jesus Christ came into the world to destroy—the works of the devil, the inherent existence of sin in the human heart.

This view has been uniformly taken by evangelical Christians in every age of the world. Since the days of Simon Peter, no more violent reformer had appeared than Martin Luther. He spared nothing which he believed wrong. He fought everything that came in contact with his dogmas. John Calvin had an unyielding determination, an unpolished severity, a revolutionary spirit, that gave no quarter. Yet neither of these reformers proposed a war upon the existing laws of their respective countries. John Wesley was the great reformer of modern times. He moulded afresh every society which embraced his doctrines. He created anew the whole ecclesiastical machinery of the modern church of Christ. The revival of religion, of which he was the prime mover, has spread over the whole American continent, and is a leading element of American Christianity; but John Wesley never did make war against the government under which he lived and died. But, on the other hand, he was so

devoted to law and order, that, fearing that the revolt in the colonies might destroy the moral power of the early Christian societies, he wrote elaborately against the revolution itself. With him, the duty of submission to the law amounted almost to non-resistance. I am at a loss to know where, in the Word of God—in the Gospel of *Christ*—in the history of the church, a single example can be found sustaining the modern efforts to introduce into *ecclesiastical law-making* bodies resolutions and instructions for the direction of *legislative* bodies, unless that precedent be found in the bulls, excommunications, and pronunciamientos of the Pope of Rome—authority which governs neither you or me, or should it govern our common church in its legislative action.

If it be legitimately within the province of the church to legislate upon these questions, how far does that right extend, and where does it cease to exist? I am in great fear that an attempt will be made to change the fundamental law of the church, upon the subject of *slavery*, at the approaching session of the general conference. If the church has lived and prospered, and spread light and salvation over the land by conforming strictly to the existing law, it becomes entirely proper to enquire where this legislation is to end, and how far this right may be lawfully exercised, not to do more harm than it possibly can do good. I shall not now enquire whether slavery, as a system, is right or wrong; that is not the question. The question is, what is the duty of the church in relation to slavery? In this short letter, in discussing a subject upon which volumes have been written, I propose to myself nothing more than brief suggestions. The main doctrine has been thoroughly canvassed—very ably discussed—upon both sides. The wrongs of slavery are sent forth by more than a thousand newspapers of the country, in every weekly issue, as the organs of a great political party. The whole pulpit of the land is discussing it; indeed, to the exclusion of our old time Methodism, this has become the absorbing question in our own church. As a theory I shall therefore not enquire after its origin, causes, rights, wrongs, tendencies, or issues.

But this question has assumed a practical form and involves practical issues, upon which depend the usefulness and well being, if not the very existence, of the church itself. American slavery existed before the organization of the Methodist Episcopal church in this country; and the very first business of the church was to *place* the truth of the gospel before the master and the slave,

teaching to each one his duty. An early effort was made through our English brethren (who were entirely ignorant of our condition as a people) to make non-slaveholding a test of membership in the Methodist Episcopal church ; this being found impracticable, it was soon abandoned, and for more than sixty years the church has gone on doing her mission and blessing the country. Her history can not be written ; it is monumental. She went forth as the pioneer of civilization, and has marked out the way for succeeding progress in the moral and social organization of communities ; her preachers were booksellers, schoolmasters, peace makers, temperance teachers, who carried with them all the moral elements of a Christian reformation. Whiskey was then sold in every town, and drank in every hamlet in the west and south. But the moral influence of these men dissipated it wherever it went, just as the noonday sun melts away the snow flakes of an April morn.

Slavery then existed, and that, too, in its most loathsome, cruel and revolting form.

The slave trade was kept up until the year 1808. The untutored African heathen was not then bound by the same laws of affection that now unite master and slave together. But, in the face of this state of things, the Methodist itinerant ministry went to work, preached the Gospel of Christ to both master and slave, and through its influences transformed plantations into religious neighborhoods, of which the master was the acknowledged patriarchal head. Whilst Jesse Lee, a Virginian, was suffering indignities in the north, in his efforts to plant Methodism in the New England States, the southern States opened their houses and received the Methodist preachers as brethren and made them a part of their families.

Our church prospered in a manner without a parallel in the history of Christianity since the days of the Apostles. She threw her shadow upon each passing wave as it hurried down the stream of time. Eternity only can sum up the victories achieved by the church, the triumphs awarded to this form of the Christian religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

But restless men are not satisfied. Politicians have excited the whole land, until the country is fanned into a livid consuming flame ; and in response to the demands of political speculators our church law must be defaced, our church polity must be changed, the standard of our church morality must be determined for their benefit.

Who are these politicians who are holding the rod over the head of

the Methodist Episcopal church, and propose laying the vineyard of the Lord under tribute for the support of their contests? What have they done for Methodism that she should be subsidized for their particular interests? Is it because Unitarianism, which hath reasoned Jesus Christ out of the temple of Christianity, makes this demand? Is she afraid lest Methodism should commit an offence against Christ by continuing to teach Jesus to both master and slave? Is this the reason?

By what right do Unitarian associations demand a change in our church rules for the aggrandizement of her politicians? Is it because Universalist conventions are fearful that the members of the Methodist Episcopal church will incur the vengeance of eternal fire, that they send forth their mandate ordering a change in our church law, and outlawing our existing form of Christianity? Why, one of the principal arguments for this change in our church regulations is that the "*public opinion*," the "*outside pressure*," the "*people demand it*." What public opinion? Perhaps the interest of some political party may demand it. What has that to do with Methodism? The "*outside pressure*." Political cormorants that may mean; what right have they to expect to reap a political harvest from our Christianity? Is it that they may enter our household, devour the children's bread, and cast out the family. "*The people demand it*." What people? The Methodist people? That is not true; the Methodist people have never been consulted or questioned concerning this change. It is a wily attempt, by political demagogues, to prostitute the Methodist Episcopal church for political purposes, and then to abandon her to the contempt and insult of the whole Christian world, and it is for her to accept or indignantly reject the degrading proposition. She ought to spurn these overtures for many reasons. The first great reason is, they are wrong and corrupt. I shall give but one other, that one is a purely practical reason, and is inseparably connected with her mission, which contemplates nothing less than the conversion of the whole world, "*Jew and Gentile*," "*bond and free*," "*by none other name than the name of Jesus Christ*." What do these reformers say of slavery? That it is "*the sum of all villainies*," the greatest of all earthly wrongs; that slaveholders of all men are the greatest sinners; that the slaves are the most unhappy, the most degraded of all living human beings, and more than all others need the Gospel of Christ. As ministers of God, how ought they to seek a remedy for the evil? By giving to the slaveholder the Gospel of Christ, and the

consolations of the gospel to the slave, or by hedging up the path of the minister, so that he may not be able to reach the master's heart, and impel him to discharge his duty to his slave, as prescribed by the word of God, and then to cut off from the slave his only hope of elevation in the present life and immortality in the world to come. Can any minister who appreciates the teachings of Christ as a great practicable system, hesitate as to which is the proper course for him to choose—the only true path of duty in which for him to tread. The Gospel is destined to go everywhere ; to uproot every wrong ; to heal every malady ; to elevate all people ; to restore every right to injured man ; but it proposes to do it maturely, naturally, quietly, peaceably, yet surely. It, however, does not propose absurdities—it does not propose to give legislation and the duties and functions of civil government into the hands of the weak and ignorant. Sometimes this does unfortunately happen, that weak and ignorant men do rule for the time being, but it does not long continue.

The gospel, on the other hand, proposes to strengthen and enlighten all men, that they may all be participants in the government of the world. It does not, however, propose to invest men with legislative rights, without capacity to perform legislative duties. It proposes the moral elevation of the whole human family ; their political immunities will follow as a consequence, in some form or other, but they never can precede it. The duty of the church is a plain, clear, and explicit one ; to use moral means simply for the consummation of this great object, contemplated by the gospel itself.

How shall this be done ? How shall the Christian church relieve the spiritual wants of the whole fallen race of man, as she finds it diversified in its degradation, as it is ruined in the fall ?

In Africa the races are buried in the very depths of crime and wretchedness, as a dead body enshrouded in the gloomy habiliments of debasing idolatry and terrible superstition, not even the dim starlight of heathen philosophy sheds a glimmering ray upon their pathway. Asia, more refined, is pagan and Mahomedan in its religious belief. China, with her vast population, is essentially without God. India has millions to save or to be left to perish. And to all of these countries the Gospel of Christ is being sent. And in every one of them individual slavery exists, and other governmental wrongs which are not in harmony with individual rights. Despotisms and aristocracies exist, that rob the laborer of his hire, the man of his citizenship ; indeed, they deny to the Christian his right to worship

Christ. What do our churches propose to do? Do they propose to send men there to assail the existing forms of government, and make war upon their social system? or do they send them out to perish and die in preaching the benevolent Gospel of Christ to the people? Do they even assume that the government is the cause of these evils, or do they not rather affirm that the government is a necessary result of the evil, and the only means of restraining and controlling these various classes of population; and do they not propose to go to work to remove the great evil, the great cause, by the Gospel of Christ, the heaven appointed remedy. Why not then apply the same remedies to the evils of slavery? Who believes that the black population could enjoy liberty, or be controlled by a different system of government inaugurated at once? Who believes that it would be good policy to set loose from proper guardianship, without forecast or providence in their habits of life, four millions of men, and women, and children, freed from the only restraints which can control such a people? Who will advocate the immediate abolition of slavery in the country? Very few indeed. Well, until slavery is abolished, slaves must have masters, and the question is to be determined by the Methodist Episcopal church whether they may have Christian masters, subject to the laws of the church, or whether this privilege shall be denied to the slave. Whether a master shall be expelled for holding a slave, or whether it is his duty in this relation to abandon him to a cruel master, who acknowledges no responsibility to God.

But, to go back further, the church did not make slavery; it was the civil, not the ecclesiastical, law which declares, defines, secures, and enforces, the whole system of slavery. It will then require civil law to change that relation. But men tell us that the consciences of church members will not tolerate slavery in the same church with them, and, therefore, slaveholders should be excluded from church membership. What is the real state of the case? Is it not this, that the Methodist Episcopal church found slavery here, and, in the spirit of the gospel, commenced teaching the gospel as a system, without regard to the existing state of society, and did good, and blessed the country that was her mission, and she fought for years, and has covered herself with glory. But now malcontents are growing uneasy with her present church law. Who are they? Not the rank and file of the membership; not that self-denying body of men who are sacrificing life and the most common comforts of life to preach Christ, and who are followed by a continual revival of religion, and

who bring to the fold of the church thousands of honest Christian men each succeeding conference year.

These agitators are the *book men* of the church, who, to make employment for themselves, are seeking to change the whole phase of the present system of methodism. Who are quite tired of the "old fashioned style of things." Doctors of Divinity who would sicken the church that they might minister to its health. Physicians who make their own patients and adopt their own remedies.

But what have these brethren in view? Is it their intention, if they can, to abolish slavery? To this they answer, uniformly, no. What, then, is intended? Simply to let no good man hold a slave; or, in other words, by the gospel of Christ and the grace of God, they propose to rob the black man of the right of being (under the law) the slave of a Christian master; or, in other words, inasmuch as that he is doomed to slavery, do they propose that he shall be the property of an unconverted man. Who is prepared for this? There is still another view to be taken of this subject, which it cannot be possible that the church contemplates. It cannot be possible that the great Methodist Episcopal church will stoop to minister to the ambition of a mere political party, as such. Yet, by a misdirected zeal, she may assume a position which will so identify her with a particular party, that the world may not be able to discern the difference or discriminate between her and that party. And, while there are souls to save in every party, I humbly trust and devoutly pray God she may never commit that suicidal act. And I hope, through the blessing of God, she may sit and rise from her present session, and, in spite of political influences and an unguarded zeal, leave that Methodist law book untouched and unchanged upon the subject of slavery.

I cannot better conclude this letter than by a quotation from one which I lately wrote for the Pittsburg Christian Advocate:

There is much in the political papers of the country calculated, if not intended, to fan a flame of intestine warfare, which can result in no possible good to any one; and it does seem to me that whoever writes upon the subject of slavery, now agitating the church and the country, should temper their communications with the spirit of pure Christian charity. The church is the salt of the earth, and, in her great effort to effect one great political change or reform, even she should be careful that she does not drive the whole country into an anarchy more terrible and more destructive of true piety and civil liberty than the evils of which she now complains.

Methodism is the people's religion of the American nation. The unbroken itinerancy was the great arterial system of Methodism which

threw the life-blood of Christianity to the furthest extremities of the whole American continent ; and, as an unmutilated system, she had a strength, and capacity, and vigor which, when brought into active service, has done more for the spread of vital godliness than any other power or influence brought to bear upon society since the days of the Apostles. The genius of Methodism, standing upon the heights of the Alleghenies, could look down over the low lands upon the blue bosom of the ocean, and, with the fires of joy sparkling in her eyes, cry out, 'These are my children.' Throwing out her left hand to the hardy lumberman of Maine, and stretching forth her right arm to Georgia, she could truly exclaim, 'These are all brethren, bound by the ties of Christianity and love ;' then, wheeling and casting her eye to the setting sun, she could lift her voice in ecstacies of Christian triumph and say, 'Shall not thy kingdom, O Father in Heaven, extend from the ocean to the mountains, and from the mountains to the rivers, and from the rivers to the ends of the earth, and shall not all these be thy children ?' But the eagle wings of Methodism have been broken. Methodism is no longer a unit, as she ought to have been. The Methodist Episcopal Church South has conformed her church polity to the institutions of the southern States, as the most efficient means of diffusing the leaven of Christianity among her people, and the most successful mode of teaching religious knowledge to the slaves. The Methodist Episcopal church still remains, covering a conservative ground, but before another year I fear she too will be severed again. The conclusion seems almost foregone, the result seems almost irresistible. The conservative elements of the church will not submit to a change of discipline, and the reformers, having the power, are determined to make it. But another element of strength which bound the States together was the great national parties which covered the whole country ; which made the eloquence of Clay, the logic of Webster, the arms of Jackson, of Tennessee, and Harrison, of Ohio, the common property of a common country. Their differences were upon questions of mere policy. The most fearful threatening which now hangs over the country is that the phase of parties is not so much political as it is sectional. And men *used* to speak of their party as embracing the politics of the whole nation ; where New Hampshire and Maine stood side by side with Virginia and South Carolina, and Massachusetts and Vermont were found voting with North Carolina and Kentucky. But mere party men *now* speak of the great *North* and the great *south*, as though our *language*, our *religion*, our *hopes*, our *destiny* were not one, guided by the Almighty God to prosper or to perish together.

Nothing now remains to hold the Union together, so far as *mere* sectional party men are concerned, but the trade and commerce and moneyed interests of the country. These divisions, now threatened, are uncalled for and unnatural, and against the clearest indications of the geography of the country. One grand chain of mountains runs from the north to the south. The great rivers of the Union, the Mississippi and Missouri, have their sources in the northern extremity of the Union, and sweep their waters for hundreds of miles into the

southern gulf; and, what is a most remarkable fact, whilst the north and the south are *both* of them now in the decline of political power, each in their turn speak of the dissolution of the Union. There are no disunion men in the great, growing, and powerful west, notwithstanding these great natural divisions between them. Nor will there ever be, though the north and the south should divide. There will be an undivided great western republic. Our people will be united forever.

When the wild scream of the steamer shall die away in the romantic bluffs of the Mississippi, and the gathered waters of the western empire shall murmur their music in solemn grandeur as they sweep down their passage to the ocean, and the slow travel of the steamboat shall give way to the lightning car, then shall the northwest and the southwest be brought into nearer neighborhood, and a closer communion bind the nation together as one family. The engine will bring the wealth and fashion, and the luxuries of New Orleans and Mobile and Galveston to St. Paul and Dubuque and Chicago and Milwaukie. Southern people will seek the refreshing summer breezes of the northwestern wind in the plains of Iowa and Illinois, and meet in pic-nic parties and assemblies of religious devotion, worship the same God in the spirit of the same gospel, beneath the grateful pines of Wisconsin and Minnesota. In return, the northwestern families will, in the winter season, go in a few hours to inhale the balmy breath of the Gulf of Mexico. Their sons and daughters will seek acquaintance and intermarry. The bond will be complete, and the mightiest nation yon sun has ever looked down upon, will sit in the midst of the abundance of the earth, clothed with the garments of happiness and love, as they will be cemented into one common brotherhood.

Yours, in the bonds of Christian friendship,

HENRY CLAY DEAN.

Hon. JOSEPH A. WRIGHT,
Governor of Indiana.